SEA SAVIORS

Drawing by C. W. Ashley

By JAMES HAY, JR.

WHENEVER the wireless towers of Arlington, near Washington, throb to the story of a ship in distress at sea within striking distance of the American coastline, the Revenue Cutter Service has new work to do. The revenue cutters of this country are the emergency men, the first aids to the injured, the swift carriers of help for anybody in peril on the waves. Their officers and crews pierce the ice fields of the Arctic in midwinter, rescue starving villagers on the Alaska Coast, put down mutinies on the high seas, go to the rescue of craft belonging to the United States navy, run down derelicts, destroy dangers to navigation, and altogether subject themselves to more different kinds of dangers than any other set of men in the world.

And yet the chances are that you have the vaguest possible idea of what the Revenue Cutter Service does, under what executive department of the government it operates, what it costs, and what benefits it brings to the public. Your ideas about it are vague, because the officers and men engaged in it do their work day and night far from the presence of other human beings, and under conditions and surroundings of such a nature that only the task at hand, not the possible publicity from it, is ever considered.

Some day, according to experts in the national capital, the Revenue Cutter Service will be combined with the Life Saving Service; for the functions of both branches are similar. While the amalgamation is awaited, however, the Revenue Cutter Service, costing the government less than $2,500,000 each year and employing only 228 officers and 1,500 men, continues its individual and remarkable work under control of the Treasury Department. These are some of the things it has done in the last year:

Lives saved or persons rescued from danger of death, 327.
Persons on vessels to which aid was given, 2,755.
Vessels seized or reported for violation of law, 850.
Derelicts and navigation obstructions removed, 31.
Value of vessels assisted (cargoes included), $10,607,710.
Value of derelicts recovered and delivered to owners, $18,900.

Aside from the fact that it saved 327 lives, this service saved and returned to the public $4.29 for every dollar invested in it by the government. Figures, however, are a poor description of the heroic things done by the men on the cutters.

AN indication of what seafarers the world over think of them is found in the statement that the maritime nations, recently assembled in London in a conference on safety of life at sea, delegated to them the duty of acting as the "traffic policemen" of the Atlantic. Great Britain, Germany, France, and the other powers whose flags dot the Seven Seas, whose sailors know the rigors of the northern winds and the treachery of the typhoons, and whose cargoes come from every clime, agreed that the American Revenue Cutter Service was best fitted to promote safety in the great transatlantic steamship lane where thousands of steamers, carrying millions of dollars and tens of thousands of people, pass and repass.

The cutter service was organized in 1790 to prevent smuggling into this country. Those were the days when its officers and men, creeping across cold waters with oarlocks muffled with wisps of straw, and carrying lanterns shrouded in bags, sought to run down violators of the law. Today this same service has as one of its many duties the work of promoting safety for all the vessels of the world that cross the Atlantic. That is an evidence of how it has grown.

Since the Titanic sank and shook human confidence in the ability of man-made ships to cope with giant icebergs, it has been the object of mariners to establish an efficient patrol through the ice-infested regions of the Northern Atlantic. The idea of this is to give by wireless to the mariners more or less accurate knowledge of the presence or travels of the icebergs that come down each spring, a frozen flying squadron, from Greenland and the Arctic. The cost of the work is borne by the United States and those European maritime nations which use the transatlantic lane. And whatever glory there may be in it will go to the sailors in the thousand-ton cutters that pound the stormy reaches of the "roaring forties" for weeks at a time with never a sail in sight.

Remember always that in this service there is a total of only 1,728 officers and men. And then read this list of what services they and their vessels have to render:

Assistance of vessels in distress.
Coöperation with the navy in time of war.
Destruction of derelicts and other menaces to navigation.
Protection of customs revenue.
Enforcement of navigation and other laws governing merchant vessels and motorboats.
Regulation and policing of regattas and marine parades.
Enforcement of laws relating to anchorage of vessels.
Enforcement of neutrality laws, quarantine laws, and immigration laws.
Suppression of mutinies on merchant vessels.
Protection of game and fisheries in Alaska, and suppression of illegal traffic in firearms, ammunition, and spirits in Alaska.
Coöperation with life savers.

IN writing of an agency whose eternal task is to conquer danger and to laugh at hardships, it is possible to describe only a few incidents which may bring home some realization of the unlimited valor and the far-reaching activities of the men engaged in it,—men who perform prodigies in the rescue of lives and the saving of property, men who do not receive for their work, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, so much credit as is given in the public prints to a New York policeman who jumps off a wharf and saves an individual from drowning.

One day the Navy Department in Washington received a wireless message telling of a collision between a schooner and the torpedo-boat destroyer Warrington in a heavy gale off Cape Hatteras. The Warrington was described as being in desperate straits. This information filtered into Norfolk, Virginia, at about the same time, and a few hours later the cutter Onondaga was steaming out through the Virginia capes under forced draft, bound for the rescue of the Warrington. Nearby battleships of the United States navy lay at anchor; but they gave no aid, while the Captain and crew of the Onondaga, defying mountainous seas, took seventy-one men from the Warrington, fastened a line to the crippled boat, and towed her into Norfolk.

In Hampton Roads she met one of the battleships of the navy just steaming out to see what she could do. The logical explanation of why the battleship had not gone to the rescue sooner was that she had to "wait for orders." That is the point,—the Revenue Cutter Service is so constituted that its boats do not have to wait for orders. Frequently one of them leaves a message that she has set sail to save a ship or rescue drowning men, and goes on her way without waiting for comment from Washington.

LATE in the fall of 1897 the whole United States was startled by the information that eight whaling ships had been imprisoned in the ice near Point Barrow, the northernmost part of Alaska. The matter commanded such publicity, and the question of rescuing the whalers grew so pressing that it was finally taken up by President McKinley. He called in the Navy Department.

"How long will it take you to get a ship ready to go to the rescue of these men, and how much money do you need for the work?" was the substance of his question.

"It will take us about three months to get ready for the job, and we'll need about three hundred thousand dollars," was the reply.

While the President was considering this rather large proposition somebody suggested that he try the Revenue Cutter Service. People were beginning to think about the fact that the whalers might starve to death before the navy could reach them. He addressed to the cutter service the same question he had put to the navy.

"We can go up there pretty soon, leaving here in a week, and we won't need any extra money at all," was what the cutter people said.

Accordingly the cutter Bear, a wooden ship then twenty-three years old, set out from San Francisco for Point Barrow. Her Captain landed on the coast of